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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RIYADH 001706

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DHAHRAN SENDS
PARIS FOR ZEYA, LONDON FOR TSOU

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/14/2016
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KMPI](#) [KPAO](#) [KIRF](#) [SA](#)
SUBJECT: SHI'A CIVIL SOCIETY, LOOKING TO THE STARS

Classified By: Consul General John Kincannon for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: A meeting with the Qatif Astronomy Society on March 13th 2006 provided a snapshot of how civil society can operate in the Shi'a areas of Saudi Arabia. The Qatif Astronomy Society was begun locally with 12 founding members in February 2003, and has no license or official authorization. With assets of over 60,000 SR (\$16,000), the Society runs classes for children and adults, participates in national and international conferences, and has by-laws and a mission statement. The Society was built with the support of Shi'a community organizations, internet tools, and assistance from interested expatriates. End summary.

A LOCAL ORGANIZATION WITH A BROAD REACH

¶2. (SBU) In Awjam, a suburb of the Shi'a oasis of Qatif, PAO met with members of the Qatif Astronomy Society on March 13th, 2006. The Society began organically, when Anwar Saleh Al-Mohammad, a science teacher with a master's in astrophysics from King Fahd University for Petroleum and Minerals, began giving classes on astronomy for the local community. An interested group of students then formed the Qatif Astronomy Amateur Society and raised the money to buy a \$7000 telescope. Twelve founding members launched the Qatif Astronomy Society in February 2003, and the Society has 75 active dues-paying members, and over 300 associate members of different ages and professions. The elected president of the Society, Anwar Saleh Al-Mohammad, emphasized the solid foundation of the Society. "We are small, but strong" he said. "In Saudi Arabia everything has to be big," he continued, "but you in the West respect good things that are small."

¶3. (C) The Qatif Astronomy Society has no formal registration. "We were able to begin without government support because we were encouraged by the academic and international community," said Mohammed Al Radhwan, the vice president of the group. "But we are in a weak position. Anyone can close us at any time. So we try to be very transparent." As a result, they are very careful not to attract attention of the religious police or other authorities. Women, for instance, are usually not invited to participate in the activities for fear of attracting the wrath of the religious police.

THE SHI'A COMMUNITY IS ORGANIZED FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

14. (C) While there is little government support or recognition, the Qatif Astronomy Club has benefited greatly from the non-governmental institutions and support found in the Shi's area of Qatif. They first opened their Society in the offices of the local Computer Club in Awjam, which also donated computers. Starting out, the group held astronomy classes in local schools and in husseiniyas. They then built an additional floor to the Awjam Sports Club, which is where they will remain until they raise funding for their own building. The founding members have all donated substantial amounts of money, expertise, and time to the organization.

15. (C) The Society has also made excellent use of the internet. Part of their mission is to increase access of Arabic-speaking audiences to information about astronomy, and they translate information and write articles for their website. They launched an Arabic on-line forum to discuss upcoming astrological events. People can sign up for presentations for school children, register for week-long classes, and learn about upcoming events on the website. Participants in these activities come from throughout Saudi Arabia. The internet also helps them plug into international support, and they have participated in six international conferences so far. An expatriate American interested in astronomy assisted them in setting up their group and with the technical aspects of using telescopes.

6 (C) Comment: When discussing the "big versus small" initiatives, Anwar Saleh Al-Mohammad seemed to refer to the Saudi preference for national organizations to address issues, such as the National Dialogue, the National Human Rights Society, and other centralized activities based in Riyadh. The Qatif Astronomy Society is unusual in that it attracts a national audience due to the quality of its information and activities, but is very much a local

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organization rooted in the Shi'a community. End comment.
(APPROVED: KINCANNON)
OBERWETTER